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IMAGES OF WAR: KEN BURNS' FILM *THE CIVIL WAR*

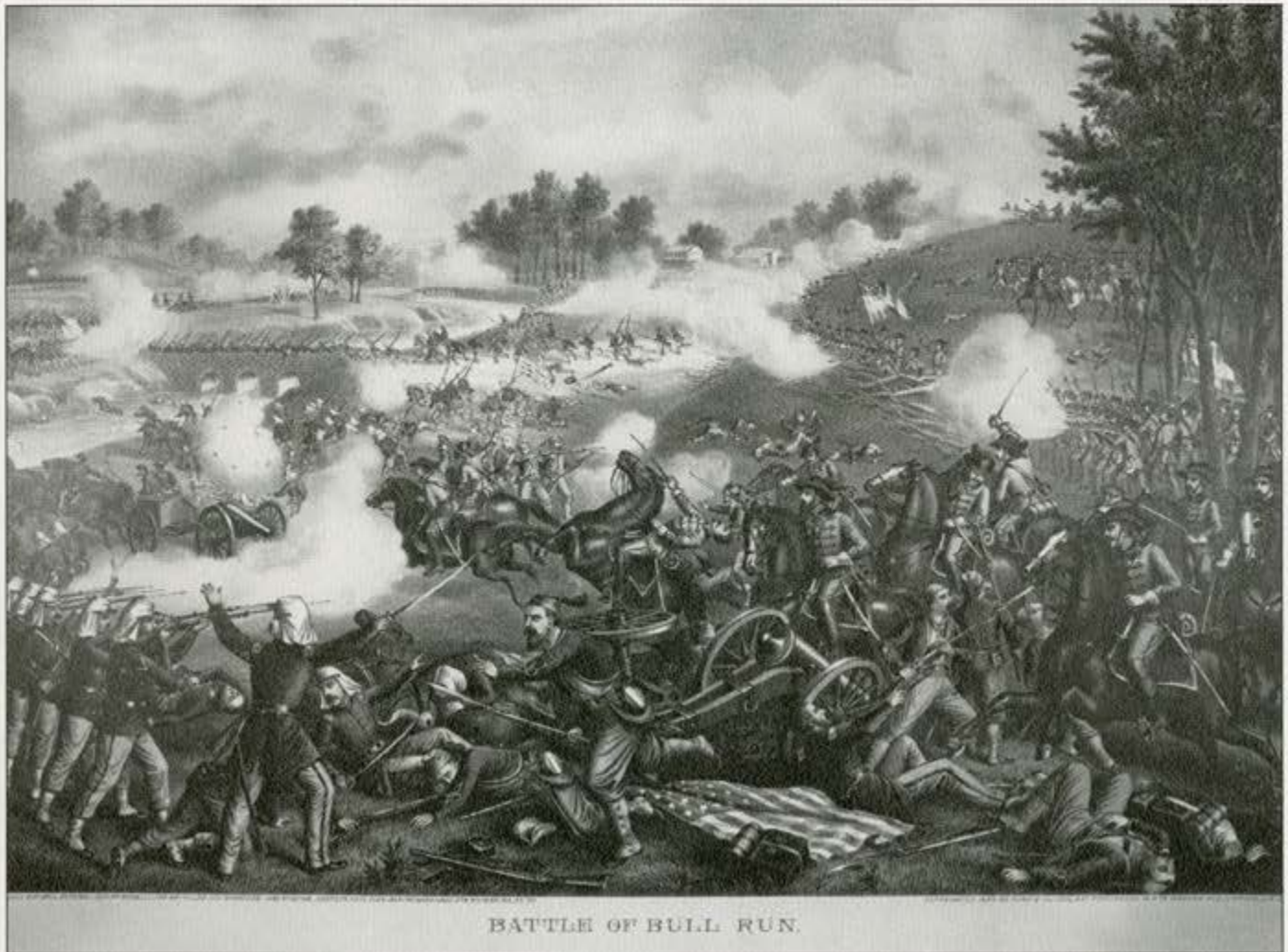
by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

On five consecutive nights, from September 23 through 27, 1990, television viewers eagerly received the PBS broadcast of the historical documentary film *The Civil War* produced by Ken and Ric Burns, and written principally by Geoffrey C. Ward. Taking five years to create, this documentary, says Burns, is "the most comprehensive treatment of the Civil War ever committed to film." In addition, these three have written an abundantly illustrated accompanying volume by the same title, published by Alfred A. Knopf, and chosen by the Book of the Month Club for its main Fall 1990 selection.¹

Ken Burns has produced films on various other historical subjects, including the documentaries *The Shakers: Hands*

to Work, Hearts to God (1984), *The Statue of Liberty* (1985), and *Thomas Hart Benton* (1988). Geoffrey C. Ward has written several works prior to *The Civil War*, including: *Before the Trumpet: Young Franklin Roosevelt, 1882-1905* (1985), and *A First Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (1989), the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Francis Parkman Prize.

That an estimated fourteen million viewers watched this program each evening, many of whom made it the topic of discussion each following day, is evidence of the continuing fascination Americans have had with the Civil War. Perhaps that fascination derives from an inability to reconcile two



BATTLE OF BULL RUN.

From The Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 1. A lithograph of the Battle of Bull Run (1861), published by the Chicago firm of Kurz and Allison. Sullivan Ballou and Elisha Rhodes saw battle here.

opposing tendencies. First is the inability to believe that a conflict of such scale could have occurred within the borders of the United States. Second is the impossibility, as Ken and Ric Burns have written in the introduction, "to imagine what we would have been like without it" (p. xvi).

Burns and his colleagues understand the Civil War as "unquestionably the most important event in the history of the nation," or as Shelby Foote (author of *Shiloh, A Novel*, and *Civil War: A Narrative*) has called it, the "crossroads of our being," which "defined us as what we are." Americans transformed their country by making war on each other for four years, "if only to become the kind of country that could no longer conceive of how that [war] was possible." Using "the words and images of those who lived through" the war, the creators of *The Civil War* want to show that "real people lived through it and were changed by the event" (pp. xvi-xix).

The documentary is, for the most part, a traditional, chronological narrative, each episode covering about a half-year. Within this, however, are discussions of thematic issues, such as camp life, wartime photography, medical practice, nursing and hospitals, conditions in prison camps, and the experiences of African-American soldiers. There is little discussion, however, of wartime conditions in Northern and Southern society. *The Civil War* is primarily a description of military campaigns from the Union soldiers' skedaddle at Bull Run to Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.

To show the human side of the war, Burns uses short biographies, contemporary letters, and diaries of persons, civilian and military, who lived through the conflict. The participants' stories which enliven the narrative were chosen specifically, says Geoffrey Ward, because they show the eyewitnesses' view: "If it were at all possible to use a soldier's words rather than my own, better his than mine, because he was there."²

Many viewers were apparently surprised and pleased by the quality of the prose of these mid-nineteenth century



From *The Lincoln Museum*

FIGURE 2. Shelby Foote and Ken Burns.

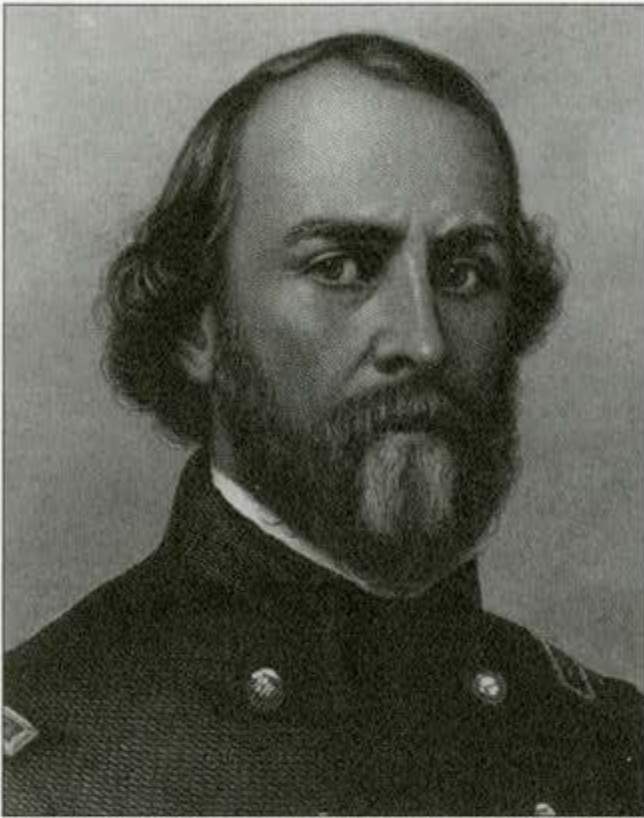
Americans. Major Sullivan Ballou, of the Second Rhode Island Regiment, wrote a letter which affected many in the television audience. Ballou was born in 1829 in Smithfield, Rhode Island, and attended Brown University in Providence for two years before pursuing a law career. As a member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives, Ballou was elected speaker, and was "possessed of unusual powers of debate and eloquence." Ken Burns carried a copy of Ballou's letter in his wallet as a reminder that *The Civil War* was to show the eloquence and depth of understanding Americans expressed during the war. As a result of Burns' film, Ballou has become a "romantic hero," but a mystery has arisen concerning the original Ballou letter. Although multiple handwritten copies of the letter exist, it is not clear where the original manuscript is or even whether it still exists. Various libraries and archives have learned that their Ballou letter is a copy, perhaps hand-copied by family members as a memento.³ Fearing he might die, and concerned that his children would "[eat] for long years of the bitter fruit of orphanage," as he had, Ballou bid farewell to his wife. Dated July 14, 1861, the letter was written one week before Ballou was killed at the first Battle of Bull Run.

I know how strongly American civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt... Sarah, my love for you is deathless: it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break, and yet my love of country comes over me like a strong wind, and bears me irresistibly on, with all those chains, to the battle-field.... If I do not [return]... never forget how much I loved you, and that when my last breath escapes me on the battle-field, it will whisper your name.... But, O Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth, and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you,.... *always, always*; and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath; or the cool air cools your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.... As for my little boys, they will grow as I have grown, and never know a father's love and care. Little Willie is too young to remember me long. And my blue-eyed Edgar will keep my frolics with him among the dimmest memories of his childhood... I wait for you there; come to me and lead thither my children."⁴

Ken Burns has described the Civil War as a "poignant family drama that reveals ... the American character," and it is that sense of drama that viewers appreciated. Viewers could see how individuals' experiences were part of the larger war. One viewer, for example, identified with the admirable Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. A Bowdoin College professor who, at various times, taught rhetoric, modern languages, and "natural and revealed religion," Chamberlain was refused a leave to join the Union cause. Granted a sabbatical to study in Europe, he joined the 20th Maine instead, and went on to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor "for daring heroism and great tenacity" in defense of Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg.⁵

These biographies of ordinary persons in extraordinary times provide a common thread through the war. Two soldiers, Sam Watkins and Elisha Hunt Rhodes, for example, "seemed to be everywhere during the war and lived to tell the tale." Although not everywhere, they are well-chosen characters, for they show us the Southern perspective on the Western Theater and the Northern perspective on the Eastern Theater, respectively, throughout the war. Another Union soldier, Theodore Upson of the 100th Indiana, enters the story more often by 1864 to tell of his experiences during his march with "Uncle Billy" Sherman through Georgia. He, too, lived to tell the tale, and his "letters, diaries, and reminiscences" are published in *With Sherman to the Sea*, edited by Oscar Osburn Winther.

As we follow their experiences, we see in eleven hours



Courtesy of the Historical Genealogy
Collection Allen County [Indiana] Public Library

FIGURE 3.
Major Sullivan Ballou, from an engraving in Bartlett's
Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers, (1867).

how the war changed them in the course of four years. Sam Watkins, a Confederate soldier, was from Columbia, Tennessee, and owned no slaves, but believed in States' Rights and that "the South is our Country, the North is the country of those who live there" (p. 54). Enlisting in 1861, he managed to live through a number of close scrapes during the war, and in December 1864, saw the final disintegration of John Bell Hood's army at the Battle of Nashville. After the war, Watkins felt he had "as much right as any man to write a history," and published his reminiscences of the "Lost Cause," in "Company Aytch," *First Tennessee Regiment, or, A Side Show of the Big Show*, in 1882.

Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a clerk from Pawtuxet, Rhode Island, entered the army as an enlisted man, served in the Eastern Theater, and eventually left the military as a brigadier general. The young Rhodes described his first engagement at Bull Run: "we were saluted by a volley of musketry, which, however, was fired so high that all the bullets went over our heads... My first sensation was... astonishment at the peculiar *whir* of the bullets... we commenced to cross the field. One of our boys named Webb fell off the fence and broke his bayonet. This caused some amusement, for even at this time we did not realize that we were about to engage in battle" (pp. 65-66). How surprising it must have been in 1865 for Colonel Rhodes to look back in his diary to see the entry written upon his unexpected election to first sergeant: "just what a First Sergeant's duties might be, I had no idea" (p. 50).

The images used in *The Civil War* give the documentary a special sense of authenticity and authority, and also tell compelling stories. Just as contemporary witnesses report the war with words, so too, do photographers with pictures. We can learn something about the influential nature of these pictures, particularly the photographs, as well as the structure of the film, by looking at Ken and Ric Burns' introduction in *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, in which they describe their purposes and methodology:

The historical documentarian's vocation, whether in a film series or a book of this kind, is not precisely the same as the historian's, although it shares many of the aims and much of the spirit of the latter. Historians delight in telling us what our history is and what it means. The documentarian, on the other hand, as often delights in recording and conveying the simple fact that we have had a history at all: that there was once a time when people looked like this, or sounded like that, or felt these ways about such things. The historical documentary is often more immediate and more emotional than history proper because of its continual joy in making the past present through visual and verbal documents. It is our belief that, so far as possible, the documents must be allowed to speak for themselves, to convey meanings and emotions and stories on their own (p. xvii).

Thus, in *The Civil War*, Burns does not try to tell the story of the war in the same way most histories do: his interpretation is hidden in the way he lets the documents and photographs tell his story. By synthesizing thousands of photographs, paintings, and lithographs, with Civil War parlor and field music, contemporary accounts, and modern commentary, he creates a solid narrative history of the political and military movements of the Civil War, as well as a moving story of several Americans who experienced it.

Nevertheless, as the authors of *The Civil War* imply in the quotation, photographs and documents cannot fully speak for themselves. Photographs, for example, are interpreted from the time the shutter is opened to the time viewers look at them. They do not merely depict scenes. What they tell is first determined by the photographer who chose to look through the viewfinder at one scene and not another.⁶ This is an important point when looking at Civil War photographs. Given the danger of battle, the equipment, and the technology, photographers took pictures of the fury of the battle only after the fact. A London *Times* reporter noted that: "The photographer who follows in the wake of modern armies must be content with conditions of repose, and with the still life which remains when the fighting is over... When the artist essays to represent motion, he bewilders the plate and makes chaos."⁷ In his studies of battlefield photography, such as *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time*, William Frassanito explains that scenes were often arranged by a photographer who moved dead soldiers from other locations. This does not diminish the power of these photographs; it merely shows that the camera is not an objective eye.

Photographs are passed through another filter by the person who arranges them in a certain order and creates his own story. According to literary scholar, Alan Trachtenberg:

To serve as history, facts must be made intelligible, must be given an order and a meaning which does not crush their autonomy as facts. The historians's task resembles the photographer's: how to make the random, fragmentary, and accidental details of everyday existence meaningful without loss of the details themselves, without sacrifice of concrete particulars on the altar of abstraction.⁸

In *The Civil War*, photographs are interpreted through processes of selection and organization, and also through commentary and sound effects. Thus film tells the story of the Civil War in ways that books cannot. There are interpretive difficulties in film, however. In a book, a particular photograph is matched with a caption that can explain its origins, context, and significance. In film, where there are no captions, the narration may attach an inappropriate or incomplete meaning to a photograph.

The Civil War is a procession of sixteen thousand period pictures, and its presentation and interpretation of them is exemplary. In only a few instances is there obvious disparity between the text and the image. For example, in Episode Nine, Mary Todd Lincoln returns to Springfield in her final years, "rarely leaving a room whose curtains were

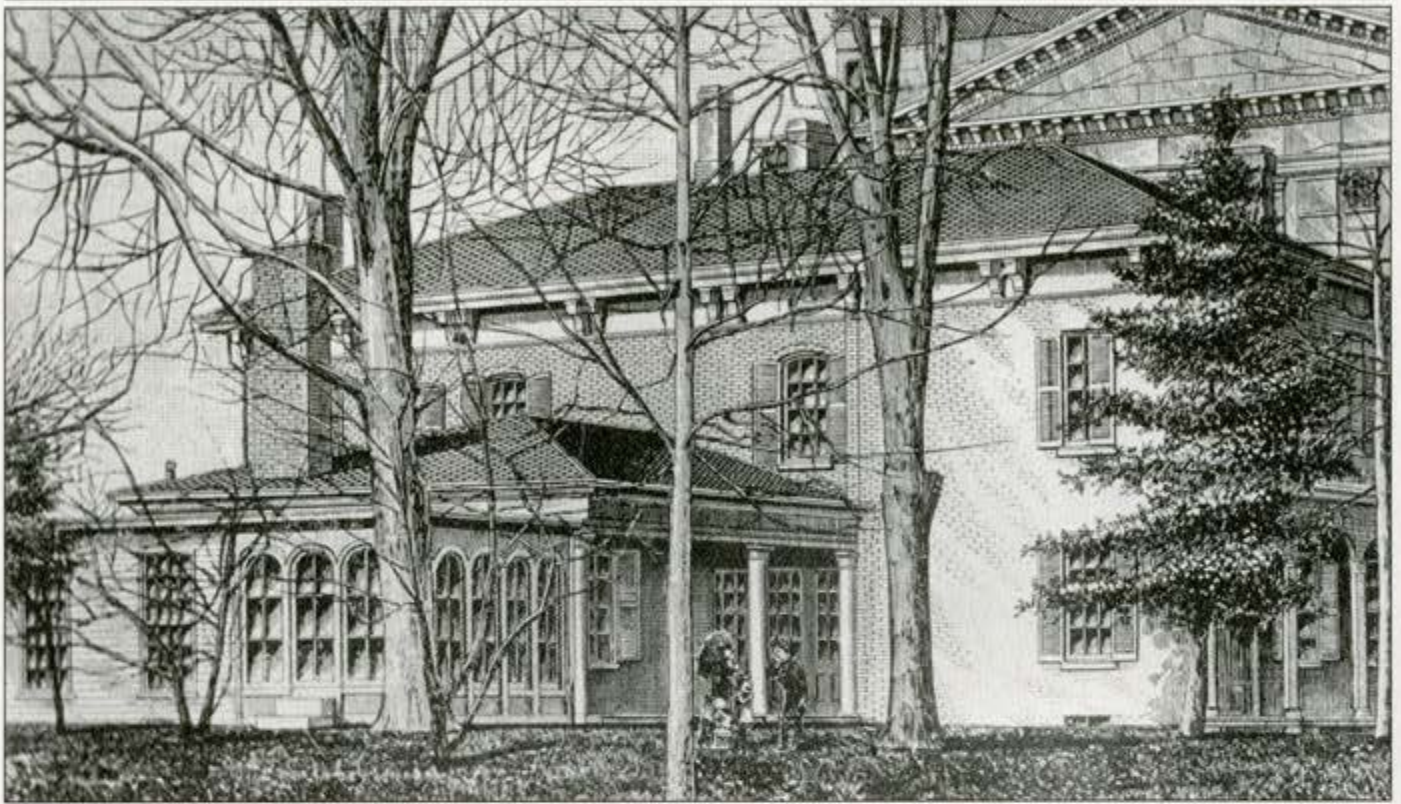


FIGURE 4.
The home of Elizabeth and Ninian Wirt Edwards in Springfield, Illinois.

From The Lincoln Museum

never raised'' (p. 409). Yet the photograph shown is of the Lincoln home at Eighth and Jackson Streets, to which Mary Lincoln refused to return. In fact, she disliked the Springfield home, and in a letter written in 1866, explained to Simon Cameron that she would not return to

our shell of a house, in Springfield from whence — as we were leaving its doors, enroute to W[ashington] my dear husband — told me, he would not carry me back there again ... and moreover dear Gen[eral] my feelings must be allowed, to have something to do with my actions — occupying the same rooms, breathing the air, where so many happy years were passed — the contrast without my husband, would simply deprive me of my reason.⁹

After her insanity trial and stay at Bellevue Place, Mary Lincoln returned to Springfield and, for a short time, lived with her sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Ninian Wirt Edwards. In late 1876, she left for France, only to return to the Edwardses' home in Springfield in 1882 during the last few months of her life.¹⁰

In other cases, the disparity is less obvious, as in the same episode, in which Leander Stilwell of the 61st Illinois returns home to Otterville, Illinois. A photograph of an agricultural scene (farm laborers and a child, arms outstretched, among the corn crop, with a flat, prairie horizon in the background) is presented with Stilwell's narrative: "So, the morning after my arrival, I doffed my uniform of first lieutenant, put on some of my father's old clothes, and proceeded to wage war on the standing corn" (p. 404). In fact, the photograph is of Norton County, Kansas, in the 1890s and includes a barbed wire fence, an invention of the 1870s that made that type of prairie farming possible.¹¹ In the accompanying volume, the authors avoid these errors.

In *The Civil War*, Burns chooses to emphasize military campaigns and participants' wartime perspectives and experiences over other aspects of this eventful period. Yet, he has succeeded in "making the past present," through primary sources such as photographs and diaries, and in the illustrated volume, he has called on several Middle Period historians to tell more of "what it means." The book includes several fine interpretive articles by Don E. Fehren-

bacher, Barbara J. Fields, Shelby Foote, James M. McPherson, and C. Vann Woodward.

The Civil War is an engaging chronicle of the four-year conflict and of persons who participated in it, and is a fine historical documentary. Although it tells little about American society in wartime — the lives of Northern and Southern families, roles of women in the economy, the condition of the economy — it nonetheless tells a memorable story of the war. These images powerfully evoke the glory, pain, suffering, sorrow, and periodic joy of that unbelievable past, and the participants are compelling as they tell their stories with insight, sensitivity, good-natured exasperation, and wit.

FOOTNOTES

1. Although this review mainly concerns the film, the citations refer to page numbers in Ward, et al., *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*. When quoting the individuals whose Civil War writings are heard in the documentary, I have referred to the book to record the prose accurately. In most cases, these quotations are found in the film, except where those unique to the book have seemed appropriate.

2. Published works written by several of the persons in the film include Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J. B. Ford & Company, 1868); Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Hartford, Connecticut: Park Publishing Company, 1882); Allen Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *Diary [of George Templeton Strong]*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1962); C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) and Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War—Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Eugene H. Berwanger, ed., *My Diary North and South [William Howard Russell]* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

3. John Russell Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers Who Were Engaged in the Service of Their Country During the Great Rebellion of the South* (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Brother, 1867), pp. 249, 250; Cathryn Donohoe, "The History of a Love Letter: 'The Civil War' makes a Romantic Hero out of Maj. Sullivan Ballou (1829-1861)" *Washington Times*, 8 October 1990, E1-2.

4. Adin Ballou, *An Elaborate History and Genealogy of the Ballous in America* (Ariel Ballou and Latimer Ballou, 1888), pp. 1058-1059.

5. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. "Chamberlain, Joshua Lawrence."

6. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), p. xiv-xv.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

9. Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 370.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 616-617, 716.

11. George E. Ham and Robin Higham, eds., *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861-1986* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1987), p. 39.